Introduction:  
British Military and Naval Medicine, 1600–1830

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The introduction reviews the historiography of military and naval medicine for the period, provides an overview of the essays, and concludes that the volume highlights the value of challenging the inherited notion that military medicine was in all respects ‘a good thing’ for medicine and society. In addition, the essays in this volume tell us more about both how military and naval medicine were components of a wider social, economic, cultural and political framework, and how medicine was part of the process of militarisation.

‘Few subjects in the history of medicine have been so poorly served as the relations between medicine and war’, wrote Roger Cooter around a decade ago, ‘serious research in this field has hardly begun’. This rather sweeping verdict no longer fully applies – thanks in part to his own important studies, both empirical and critical; and most scholars would accept that certain fields of the history of military medicine are now yielding a good harvest, especially in the modern period.

How far that brighter picture applies to the subject of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British military and naval medicine is perhaps more moot, with only a few recent exceptions. Official histories, and other works similarly rather traditional in their approaches, have been compiled and published during the last fifty years. These tend to focus on the pioneers of military and naval medicine and surgery, the development of career and administrative structures, as well as institutions. Most prominent among them include the indispensable first three volumes of Medicine and the Navy by J.J. Keevil (Vol. 1, 1200–1649, Vol. 2, 1649–1714) and C. Lloyd and J.L.S. Coulter (Vol. III, 1714–1815). For military medicine, the first volume of N. Cantlie’s A History of the Army Medical Department is similarly a foundation work for those interested in developments in the nature of administration, medical personnel, and treatments in the period. Certain sources have been made more easily available, with perhaps the most useful
volume for students being C. Lloyd’s *The Health of Seamen*, which includes well-chosen selections from the works of James Lind, Gilbert Blane, and Thomas Trotter.³

Despite a new interest in the history of war itself, and certain innovative general military and naval histories – N.A.M. Rodger’s *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* springs to mind⁶ – there have been few published monographs or path-breaking works of synthesis for Britain. This scholarly lacuna is reflected, for example, in Lindsay Granshaw’s chapter on ‘The Rise of the Modern Hospital in Britain’ (1992) which does not even mention the enormous military and naval hospitals that developed in Britain during this period, let alone discuss their influence on medicine and society.⁷ This scholar gap in the literature is also apparent in history course offerings.

More recently, a contributor to this volume, Eric Gruber von Arni, has published a monograph entitled *Hospital Care and the British Standing Army, 1660–1714* (2006)⁸ which investigates the nature of medicine and nursing in hospitals for soldiers using a wide variety of sources during an important developmental period. In addition, Laurence Brockliss, John Cardwell and Michael Moss have recently published *Nelson’s Surgeon: William Beatty, Naval Medicine, and the Battle of Trafalgar* (2005).⁹ Here, the authors draw on the work of Lloyd and Coulter, as well as an ongoing prosopographical study of nine hundred army and naval surgeons, to analyse the nature of the naval medical service (education, training, work) in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. They also explore the role of naval medicine, including preventative medicine, in the Napoleonic Wars, but more work clearly needs to be done.

The relative paucity of British work in this area is in marked contrast to work on the Continent. This is reflected in Ole Peter Grell’s chapter on ‘War, Medicine and the Military Revolution’ in Peter Elmer’s recent textbook for the Open University entitled *The Healing Arts: Health, Disease and Society in Europe, 1500–1800* (2004), where Grell relies on contributions to the literature from scholars such as Geoffrey Parker.¹⁰ In *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in Reformation Europe* (2000), Grell, with co-author Andrew Cunningham, discusses war and medicine within the overall context of an argument for the pervasiveness of a belief in the apocalypse, *circa* 1490–1648. In particular they argue that:

*[E]arly modern warfare with its extensive use of guns and gunpowder caused suffering and injuries on an unprecedented and horrific scale, which was more often not beyond any relief. As such it also affected the views and attitudes of the leading thinkers and theologians of the day.*¹¹